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James Kinzer of Lake Bluff is a self-described granddad to local children, a noticeable figure on his motor scooter driving through town -- and a war hero.

Not one to bring up the subject, most people don't know the 82-year-old was a B-17 navigator during World War II, flying some of the most dangerous missions of the war.

A member of the 384th bombardment group flying out of Grafton-Underwood, England, Kinzer and his crew completed 31 successful missions during World War II, flying deep into Germany -- including three missions to Berlin, 15 over France during the Normandy invasion and one mission to Poland to bomb a German fighter airplane factory there.

"This was extraordinarily dangerous," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th. "He is a living hero. He sets an example for everyone to look up to. He didn't just fly one or two missions. He was flying all the way across Hitler's Reich and all the way back. The B-17 crews suffered some of the highest casualty rates of World War II. We're lucky to have him."

Kirk honored Kinzer at a Memorial Day service in Arlington Heights on Monday. The Congressman returned to Kinzer all the medals he had earned -- yet lost -- over the years, including the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with three oak leaves and three battle stars.

Kinzer volunteered for the Army Air Corps after seeing a photograph of a navigator in the nose of a B-17 plotting his course in Life magazine.

"That inspired me," he said. "I enlisted and asked for navigation training."

Kinzer enlisted on Feb. 5, 1943 and flew missions from May 11, 1944 to Aug. 3, 1944.

As a navigator, it was Kinzer's job to make sure the plane was on course and on time.

"My most memorable missions were the deep-penetration missions into Germany to Berlin, to Leipzig, to Merseburg, to Stettin and to the docks at Hamburg and Bremen," he said. "We never attacked civilian targets. They were always marshaling yards, chemical plants, harbor facilities and manufacturing facilities."

His B-17 had a crew of 10: a bombardier, an engineer, a radio operator, two waist gunners, a ball turret gunner, a tail gunner and a navigator.

"No one on our crew was ever killed or wounded," he said. "We were a lucky statistic."

The 8th Air Force suffered more casualties than the Marines in the Southwest Pacific, Kinzer said.

From February 1943 to his discharge as a 1st lieutenant on Nov. 25, 1945 Kinzer was assigned to air transport command "ferrying various aircraft to various parts of the free world -- Brazil, Morocco, Libya, Egypt and India," he said.

How his service to his country affected him is hard for Kinzer to say.

"I don't contemplate that," he said. "I don't boast or brag about it. I'd say it was the satisfaction of performing a patriotic duty and sticking by your buddies in combat travail."

When he enlisted, Kinzer's family wasn't surprised -- they had family members serve in every war in U.S. history.

"I was doing what other patriotic young men were doing," he said of enlisting. "It was common."

To Kinzer, a true World War II hero, Memorial Day is always a special day.

"It means the remembrance of those who died for their country and for those veterans still alive to enjoy this country," he said.